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CIA Prober Hints Curb On Killings

By George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

The chairman of the Senate intelligence operations committee warned yesterday that Congress may have to enact legislation prohibiting the Central Intelligence Agency from engaging in assassinations abroad.

"It is simply intolerable that any agency of the government of the United States may engage in murder," Frank Church (D-Idaho) told reporters after the committee's third secret session with CIA Director William E. Colby in 10 days.

Under questioning for three hours, Colby testified solely on the question of CIA involvement in assassination efforts and plots, Church said.

Although the senator repeatedly refused to state explicitly that Colby is acknowledging CIA participation in such schemes, his remarks implied that this is the case.

Pressed to explain what he regarded as "intolerable," Church said: "I mean the United States government cannot involve itself in murder. I'm concerned about the good name and reputation of the United States."

As a result, he said, "if the facts were to lead the committee to the conclusion that there have been activities of this kind, we will insist that the laws be so written that this will never happen again" in times of peace.

The committee is investigating allegations that CIA officials and agents at various levels took part in plans and efforts to assassinate a number of foreign leaders, including Cuban Premier Fidel Castro.

The White House commission headed by Vice President

Rockefeller has been conducting a similar investigation, on the premise that such activities are already a violation of U.S. conspiracy law if any overt acts were carried out in this country.

Asked how high up "assassination discussions" went and whether they involved the White House at any time, Church said this was still unclear. "We're examining that matter very carefully," he said.

Shortly after Colby was named to head the agency in 1973, he issued a directive ruling out assassination efforts, in the wake of the CIA inspector general's investigation of illegal and improper activities brought to light by reports from agency employees. The inspector general's report was recently supplied to the Church committee although Church has said the section on assassinations was initially deleted.

Despite the directive, Church said he considered the issue too serious to leave to an

administrative edict that could be rescinded later. "This is a matter of such gravity that it goes right to the roots of our morality as a nation," he said.

At one point, a reporter suggested that Church's expressions of concern were meaningless unless he was saying in the same breath that the CIA had been involved in assassination plots.

"That's a surmise on your part," Church replied. Asked if it were a correct surmise, he said: "I'll leave that to you."

Such fencing with the press has become a standard byproduct of the committee's stringent secrecy rules which, among other restrictions, prohibit the disclosure of executive-session testimony without a majority vote of the entire 11-man panel.

Church also declined to say whether the CIA and Mafia figures were involved in a 1961 plot to kill Castro, as reported earlier this week. He said he would be "crossing the line" of the committee's rules if he answered the question.

The committee will call

Colby back for more questioning on the assassination issue after the 10-day Memorial Day recess. The CIA director had been expected to testify yesterday about the controversial Phoenix program he once directed in South Vietnam to uproot the Communist Vietcong infrastructure, but Church said "we had far too many questions" about assassinations to get into that.

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